Hey, Sister

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Hey, Sister

by lurkinglurkerwholurks

Summary

There was so much blood.

——Can be read as a standalone——

Notes

Whumptober prompts 5 (blood loss), 9 (caught in a storm), 21 ("you're safe now"), 24 (blood covered hands), alt7 (protective), alt11 (stabbed).

Bit the bullet finally and added this to a loose "series" for The Return, but you don't need to read those other fics to understand what's going on. THAT SAID, for other incidents mentioned in passing, check out 1) If the Sky Comes Falling Down and 2) The Return. Also, the rest of the Mutual Aid series that this is a part of. Also (S)kittish, my Whumptober fic from earlier, has some of Cass's perspective re: what's going through her head when she's incapacitated.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Of all the hardships of daily life in Gotham—crime, high cost of living, giant sewer rats, clown sightings—blizzards usually weren't one of them. Tim preferred it that way. He didn't mind winter, happy for any excuse to stay indoors where the electricity and refrigerators were, but he hated the snow. Cold was bad and wet was bad and together, well, he'd rather take the sewer rats.

The city at large seemed to agree with him. A nor'easter appeared on the radar, bearing down on Gotham like a freight train, and the streets went silent. Dick had called off patrol in Bruce's absence, knowing even the Rogues would be safely tucked into their holes. That, and with Bruce out of town, Dick and Damian had full access to Alfred's hot cocoa.

Tim could have joined them, if he had wanted. They had been participating in weekly family dinners for a few months now, and no one had been stabbed, strangled, or otherwise maimed. But the idea of being snowed in with Damian and without Bruce hadn't appealed, so Tim had begged off to his own apartment.

He had gone back to that gray little space and kicked around his living room for all of a half hour before throwing some gear into a backpack and hoofing it over to Jason's, one eye on the sky. He didn't call ahead. Tim had risked dropping in without an emergency more and more often, but asking permission or giving a warning still felt like a step too far. If Jason wanted to throw him out, he could. He hadn't yet.

Besides, Tim didn't think Jason would mind the company, not tonight. While Tim wasn't sure if snowstorms were a different beast from the thunderstorms that made Red Hood flinch and shiver, Tim figured the console in his bag was enough to lease out some time.

Sure enough, Jason had rolled his eyes at the sight of Tim crawling through his window, but he hadn't chased him off. He'd even looked interested at the mention of the games Tim had brought. Tim tried not to look too visibly pleased, but was pretty sure he failed when Jason rolled his eyes again.

"I gotta pee," Tim announced, kicking his shoes off in the corner and dumping the bag on the floor. "Get it set up?"

“What am I, your servant?” Jason shot back. “This is my house!”

Tim only laughed and ducked into the bathroom. This was the unending cycle of life—drink and pee, drink and pee. Alfred could get onto him about hydration all he wanted, but honestly, Tim would take kidney stones if he had the chance. They couldn’t be *that* bad.

He had just finished washing his hands when the night went sideways.

“Tim!” Jason’s voice, carefully never raised when Tim was around, thundered. Tim startled and almost yanked the hand towel off the rack. “Get in here!”

Tim lunged across the narrow bathroom and opened the door, only indulging in a flash of worry that he had done something wrong, that he was about to face Red Hood instead of Jason and have payment for some unknown offense taken out of his hide.

His mind was already miles ahead, guessing, calculating, fretting, but all calculations stopped when Tim staggered to a halt just inside the living room and saw Jason, hunched in front of the open window, trying to hold up the slumped body of Black Bat.

The image did not compute. Cassandra, as far as Tim knew, did not interact with Jason, not even on patrol. He didn’t think anyone else even knew where Jason lived. And he had never, *never* seen Bat pick up more than a bruise in the field.

There was so much blood.

“Help me,” Jason hissed, bobbling her limp body as he tried to adjust his hold.

The order snapped Tim free, and he darted forward. “Put her down. Lay her down.”

“Bathtub,” Jason insisted instead, and Tim wondered if she was already dead, if they were going to have to cut her up so Bruce didn’t find out. Did Jason even own a hacksaw?

But no, she was still breathing, eyes rolled back in her head but pulse fluttering in her neck as Tim hurried around to grab her lower half and help support her spine. She was slippery with blood—hers, someone else’s, or both, Tim wasn’t sure—and melting snow, and leaks on the floor made the path treacherous.

“What happened?” Tim asked, grunting slightly as they had to pause to maneuver back through the bathroom doorway.

“The hell if I know,” Jason snarled. “I was trying to get the input set up and then she was just there, crawling through my window. What *is* it with you stupid birds and landing at my place in awful weather?”

It was a weird echo, now that Tim thought about it. And if Jason was making that connection, that probably meant dismemberment wasn’t on the table. Not that Tim thought it *was*, not really, but he’d been on a true crime kick, and the bathtub had certain connotations. Probably best he hadn’t said any of that out loud.

“Where’s her mask?” Tim wanted to know. She was in Black Bat’s costume from the neck down, but her face was bare.

“Must’ve taken it off,” was Jason’s insightful reply.

“She’s bleeding all over my clothes,” Tim said, because he didn’t know what else to say instead. He hated the feeling of another person’s blood on him. Not that his own was all that great, but the foreign heat of it, the smell, and *knowing* it was someone else’s…

Maybe Jason understood, because the snort he gave wasn’t impressed, but he didn’t argue either. Getting Black Bat into the tub without knocking her against the wall or dropping her entirely was tricky, and they worked in silence except for curt, grunted directions.

“Kitchen,” Jason said once she was inside. He lifted his foot to step carefully into the tub. “Get the lantern on top of the fridge. And shut the window.”

He was fully in the tub now, feet placed on either side of Black Bat’s legs, and was pulling his sweatshirt over his head.

Tim hesitated. Jason balled the sweatshirt in his hands.

“*Move*,” Jason snapped.

Tim moved.

He skidded across the strip of floor in front of the window, shivering and grimacing in the blast of cold air as his socked feet slipped in blood and blown snow, then stretched to jam the window shut. Not daring to slow down, he hopped from one foot to the other, ripping off and discarding the socks in a wad before taking a leap over the entire

mess and hurrying to the kitchen. One electric lantern acquisition later, he was sprinting back into the bathroom.

Jason was kneeling in the tub now, straddling Cassandra at the hips in his t-shirt as he pressed his wadded sweatshirt to her abdomen.

“Kit. Under the sink,” he said, but Tim was already reaching. He set the lantern atop the toilet tank and flipped it on, then knelt on the thin strip of tile outside the tub and unlatched the first aid kit.

“What’s wrong with her?” Tim asked. He knew enough to lay out antiseptic, gauze, the things they might need for a make-do stitch job. But was there shrapnel to dig out? A bullet? Something else?

It was stupid, but it hadn’t occurred to him before now that Black Bat could be taken down by something as mundane as a weapon. Slowed down, maybe. Stopped by something extraterrestrial or magic, sure. But a gun, a regular gun? It didn’t seem like enough.

“Laceration,” Jason grunted. “On her side. Haven’t been able to look for anything else yet, but that’s where the blood seems to be coming from. Hypothermia, too.”

Tim looked again, noticing for the first time her white lips and pale skin. So not just blood loss. “Shit.”

Jason grunted his agreement.

What was she even doing out tonight? It was too cold for crime. And where were the others?

“Help me.” Jason’s order jerked Tim back to the problem at hand. “We’ve got to get these layers off.”

Tim made a face, but nodded. Hypothermia could kill her, but not as fast as blood loss. Best to at least stabilize her temperature so they could treat the hemorrhage, then worry about warming her up. Jason shifted as best he could, keeping his weight on the wadded sweatshirt but angling to the side to allow Tim room to lean in.

Tim had just started to tug on the hidden zipper of Black Bat’s outer layer when she woke.

There was no in between. She was unconscious, dead weight getting lighter by the minute as she stained the bathtub red, and then she was a live wire, throwing a punch that clipped Tim across the chin and

knocked him back into the vanity.

“Woah, woah!” Jason shouted, his voice overlapping with Tim’s own quieter but no less heartfelt “*Shit*.”

It was a glancing blow, only thanks to Tim’s own hair-trigger reflexes, but Tim still saw stars. Unable to move backward any further, he scuttled sideways, trying to put as much distance between himself and the former assassin as possible. Instead of doing the same, Jason kept pressure on Black Bat’s stomach wound, which left him well within striking distance. Tim thought that was either extremely brave or absolutely suicidal.

“Cassandra!” Jason shouted, voice amplified in the small room. “Cass! You’re safe. It’s *safe*.”

What did he think that was going to do?!

Tim could think of no place he would less like to be that in a confined space with a trapped Cassandra Cain. Except for maybe *on top of* Cassandra Cain. And if Cassandra killed Jason, Bruce might forgive Cassandra, but he wouldn’t forgive Tim for letting it happen.

Tim reversed his scuttling and instead lunged toward the bathtub. Plucking a small syringe from the kit, he fumbled it once, then plunged it into the meat of Black Bat’s shoulder. It was a small-dose sedative, too mild for Tim’s taste—he would’ve preferred an elephant tranquilizer—but it was enough in Cassandra’s state to make her slump back into the curve of the tub.

“The ffffffrankenstein was that?!” Jason demanded, apparently angry enough to stumble over one of his usual alternatives.

Tim lobbed the empty syringe into the sink to be disposed of later, then slumped back against the vanity and rubbed his jaw. “Sedative.”

But then he looked up and saw the flash of green in Jason’s eyes. Oh. Jason was mad at *him*, not Cassandra. Oh no.

“She was *scared*,” Jason seethed. His shoulders twitched, as if only the need to maintain pressure kept him from lifting bloodied hands and wrapping them around Tim’s neck.

“She was out of her mind!” Tim protested. “She was going to hurt herself AND you AND me. More!” He waved at the blossoming bruise on his face.

“She’s hypothermic and hemorrhaging and you gave her a *sedative.*” Jason pressed his lips together so tightly they disappeared. His chest rose and fell with three deep, deliberate breaths, and when he spoke again, his voice was deadly cold. “Get over here and finish getting this suit off so we can *fix* this before the Cave gets another stupid memorial case.”

That was enough to get Tim moving again. Squeezing himself in next to Jason and Cassandra was not his first choice, but coaxing Bruce through the death of another kid was his very last.

Tim managed to pull off or cut away the costume until Black Bat was gone and only the base layer remained. Other than a few gritted-teeth instructions from Jason, they worked together in complete silence. Sedated but not unconscious, Cassandra watched from under heavy eyelids, gaze fixed on Tim. He didn’t return her look, not directly, sparing only furtive peeks to make sure the sedative wasn’t wearing off, that she wasn’t going to lash out again, that she was still breathing and not, as Jason put it, another memorial case in the making.

Jason, for his part, didn’t speak to Tim at all unless he needed Tim to do something, and then he spoke in terse, single-word commands. But with each movement, he told Cassandra exactly what he was doing, voice calm and low and gentle in a way that made Tim’s stomach twist. For her part, Cassandra made no sign that she heard or understood, but she didn’t move again.

At long last, Cassandra’s wound—a deep, slicing knife wound—had been patched. Neither of them could see any sign of internal nicks or injuries to major organs, but the storm was too bad to get a professional opinion. They would just have to watch her.

Getting her dressed was a trickier job than the reverse, and Tim did exactly what Jason told him to do and no more. As they lifted her out of the tub with cautious, mincing movements, careful not to undo their hard work, Tim’s brain buzzed, fussing around the unhappy snarl in his chest like a bug circling a lamp.

Because he *was* unhappy, and he didn’t know why. No, that wasn’t totally true. He didn’t know a lot of things, and that was part of why he was unhappy. Cassandra Cain was still largely a mystery to him. She had joined the family before Damian, but not long enough before that Tim had had any real time to get to know her. The language barrier or lack thereof was an issue, and then Bruce had died and they had all splintered apart like shrapnel in an explosion. Cassandra had

disappeared during Bruce's funeral and Tim had been too lost in himself to go after her. Dick, at least, had tried and been rebuffed, and Tim had been content to let that be that. He had been ashamed of his own inaction, later, when he had started *feeling* again. Sure, he had been focused on getting Bruce back, and he had been right, but if he hadn't? If Bruce had stayed dead, or if the search had taken years instead of months, would Tim have even thought to look for Cassandra after? He didn't know, and he hated that he didn't know.

Once they were out of the bathtub, Jason took over entirely, lifting Cassandra from Tim's grasp into a bridal hold and carrying out of the bathroom. Tim trailed behind them, watching with growing consternation as they moved through the living room without stopping, and then into the bedroom. Tim stopped on the threshold, toes on the far side of the entrance. He wasn't allowed in this room. Jason had never actually said so, but Tim knew. He had broken that rule only once, on a dark and miserable night when his options had been following the rules or saving Hood's life, but never since. But Jason hadn't hesitated, crossing the room to gently lay Cassandra atop the bed.

The rules never seemed to apply to her, and Tim didn't know why.

"There's an electric blanket in the linen closet," Jason said, voice gruff. "Get it."

Right. Hypothermia.

Tim did as he was told, again stopping just outside the door, and watched as Jason plugged in the blanket and arranged it on the bed. The white shock of hair fell down over Jason's eyes as he bent and murmured something in Cassandra's ear.

They didn't interact on patrol, not that Tim had ever seen. Not that Black Bat ever mixed it up much with anyone except Batman, but while Red Hood would sometimes wing a snarky reply Nightwing's way or even consent to patrol alongside Red Robin, Tim had never noticed any acknowledgement between Black Bat and Red Hood other than an exchanged nod.

Tim had left the doorway and now knelt in front of the window, paper towels and bleach bottle in hand, to try to lift up the drying blood. The storm still howled outside, pitch black except for the ever-rising piles of snow growing in the corners of the frame. Why had Black Bat been out in this weather? And why had she come here, rather than

call the Cave for help? Dick would have come for her, she had to know that.

When Jason emerged from the bedroom, he grabbed a scrub brush and handful of cleaning rags from under the kitchen sink, along with a second bottle of bleach solvent and two pairs of latex gloves. He didn't speak, even when he chucked a set of gloves at Tim's head, so Tim didn't either. He still remembered the eerie flash of green in Jason's eyes. Tim knew about the Pit by now and could guess, based on what he had observed firsthand from Ra's al Ghul, what sort of things might be happening in Jason's head. Thinking about it made his ribs ache with phantom pain. Then he didn't want to think about it at all.

Tim was so determined not to think about the Pit or Jason's anger or anything at all that he startled when Jason spoke into the silence.

"You act more scared of her than you do of me." Jason didn't sound angry anymore, but his voice was flat, which was worse. "Why?"

Tim chewed on his bottom lip, trying to guess which part Jason was mad about. He'd thought they were doing okay. He was still careful not to push his luck or overstay his welcome, but on nights like tonight, when there was no reason for Tim to come by and Jason let him in anyways, it had seemed like they were doing okay. Like maybe they were a little more than allies, maybe even on their way to being friends.

Did Jason *want* Tim to be afraid of him?

"I'm not scared of Cassandra," Tim replied, deciding to bypass the comparison entirely. "I respect her abilities. She trained with Shiva and David Cain. She's deadly, and we're lucky to have her on our side."

"You're *scared* of her," Jason insisted, heat creeping into his voice. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not!" Tim began, but Jason cut him off.

"Has she ever laid a hand on you? Any of you?" Jason wanted to know. "Shot you? Stabbed you? Beat you?"

Tim had stopped scrubbing, resting back on his heels to shake his head, bemused. Maybe they'd had some lines crossed when Cassandra first landed in Gotham, but…

“She wasn't behaving rationally,” Tim said slowly. He had a growing bruise on his chin to prove it. “What did you want me to do, let her hurt herself further? Maybe I should’ve sat there and let her break my jaw and bleed out in the process.”

“You could’ve tried talking to her.” The accusation was a snarl pulled from beneath a curled lip.

“Jason—”

“Why do you think she freaked out?” Jason demanded. He’d gone back to scrubbing, the muscles in his forearms bunching as the lather frothed pink on the linoleum. “She came here for help, and it wasn’t until she saw your stupid face that she got scared.”

That wasn’t—No. Black Bat wasn’t… Not of *Tim*.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tim insisted.

Jason huffed. “Sure.” He rose and retreated to the kitchen trash with a wad of stained rags.

“What, when are you and Black Bat such buddy-buddies?”

“Jealous?” Jason spat back. He dumped the rags and his latex gloves into the trash and let the metal lid shut with a clang. “I didn’t ask to be the dumping ground for little birds in crisis, alright? But I think it’s bullshit that apparently I know more about what’s going on in that girl’s head than you do.”

Tim gave up on scrubbing. The bleach fumes were making his head swim, and it wasn’t even his floor. He gathered up the soggy paper towels and pitched them and the gloves into the trash as well.

Jason had stomped off into the bedroom and came back with clothes. “I’m going to hose down,” he announced, not looking at Tim. “Keep an eye on her, but step one foot in that room and I’ll cut it off.”

He tossed half of the pile onto the couch, then marched into the bathroom and shut the door with a slam.

Well… That was just… Tim fidgeted where he stood, unable to sit down, sticky and tired and uncomfortable and *confused*. If the storm weren’t so bad, he would just leave. Go back to his own gray apartment, use his own shower, change into his own clothes. Maybe he’d only been fooling himself, gambling with the devil by assuming

any kind of safety in Red Hood's orbit, but he had banked on his welcome. Worse, he had banked on being the only one welcome.

"Jealous?"

Tim hunched his shoulders and stared down at his toes. He had been so confused when Cassandra first joined the family. Tim had gotten used to the way things were at the Manor. Dick might make references to the way Bruce had been before Jason's death, how he'd been more open, more affectionate, less… Bruce. But Tim hadn't known any better. He'd accepted Bruce's extremes as part of the grieving process and just rolled with it. Tim didn't miss the emotional displays because he'd never had them from his own parents, so why would he miss them in his next-door neighbor? It had taken Tim a long time to understand that Bruce cared for him, *loved* him, even after the adoption. And Bruce had softened the longer Tim had stuck around, gotten better about awkward shoulder pats turning into hugs, been more deliberate about spending time together outside of masks, just the two of them.

And then Cassandra had come. Nonverbal, practically feral, filthy from the streets, at least one known kill to her name, with ties to foes crisscrossing her history like netting. And Bruce had loved her immediately. She had been wary of them all at the start, but quickly lost all such fear of Bruce. Tim, for his part, had worried about a trap, about the role Cassandra might be playing, bait and iron jaws alike. He couldn't beat her in a fight. No one could, except Bruce, and Bruce wouldn't see her coming.

Later, of course, he'd known better. There was no faking that kind of loyalty, not for long, and Cassandra had seemed as genuinely devoted to Bruce as he was to her. She had bought in to Batman's mission wholeheartedly, and even before Bruce's death, everyone knew adoption papers were in the works. So Tim had tried to get to know her, little chats here and there. Small talk in the field, at least on his end. He took notes, marking down her habits, her preferences, her tells. But beyond that, Tim had to admit, at least to himself, that he hadn't tried very hard.

Tim tiptoed to the bedroom doorway and watched the still figure on the bed. He wasn't sure how he would know if anything was wrong, couldn't make out her breathing even now from where he stood, but this time Jason's threat didn't feel hyperbolic.

Since Bruce had brought her back from overseas, Tim had thought

they were doing okay. Cassandra had been more open than before, more visible in her off days, but so had they all. Posturing had done a whole lot more harm than good before, and Tim, at least, was trying to learn from his mistakes. They all were. He'd tried to be more proactive about partnering with Black Bat in the field, took more initiative to engage with her at family dinners or in passing when he was at the Manor. It had been easier now that he and Bruce were in a better place. It hadn't burned so much to pass the library and see them on the couch, Cass's head in Bruce's lap as he read, or sparring together in the Cave, or taking walks across the lawn. He had time with Bruce, too, and they had all missed Bruce horribly. So Tim had tried to make peace and build ties with his new sister. And he had thought they were doing okay.

He hadn't known she was hanging out with Jason, too.

"She came here for help, and it wasn't until she saw your stupid face that she got scared."

Scared of Tim and not scared of Jason. Maybe in another context, Tim would have felt good about that. He didn't now.

"I think she's still stable," Tim murmured as Jason came up behind him. He had heard the door open and wasn't surprised by the extra body in the living room. "Hard to tell from here, though."

"Get cleaned up," was Jason's only reply, still flat but less angry and more… tired.

"I don't want Cass to be scared of me," Tim admitted quietly.

"That's big of you." Jason's reply was acidic.

"I apologize," Tim snapped back, though he was careful to keep his voice low. "I'm batting two for four on fam—team members who've tried to kill me. And this hasn't been the best year."

A muscle jumped in Jason's jaw, but he didn't argue the point. Tim didn't think he was going to reply at all, but then Jason said, "She knows, you know. That you're all scared of her."

Tim hesitated. "How do you know?"

Jason shook his head. "Not my story to tell." He snuck a look down at Tim out of the corner of his eye and admitted, "She's only been here once before, but I guess she…" Jason sucked on his teeth, considered

what to say and what not. “First time you came here, you remember what you told me?”

That he had had nowhere else to go.

Tim’s eyes widened, and he stared at Jason. Jason didn’t elaborate or even nod, just let Tim think about it for a bit.

“I’ll take first shift,” Jason said at last. “Go get cleaned up.”

Tim glanced once more through the open doorway, then did as he was told.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> *In the stark relief of the lamplight, Tim wondered for the first time if Cassandra's nose had been broken in the past. Where the nearly invisible puckered white line beneath her left eye had come from. When she had gotten the empty piercings in her ear.*

Chapter Notes

> It's been actually literally a year and a half (or two years if you just look at the year date.) In case you weren't sure, yes! This chapter kicked my butt! Many thanks to audreycritter for reading and keeping me going because WHUFF.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason took more than the first shift. With game night canceled, Tim sat on the couch and scrolled through his phone until he fell asleep. He woke hours later, dragged from sleep by the howling of the wind at the window. A glance at the time on his phone made him scrub a hand across his face and sit up.

The living room was empty and dark, but there was a faint glow of light from the bedroom. With a grunt, Tim untangled his legs from the afghan that had been tossed over him, then shuffled on bare feet to the doorway.

Cassandra lay still on the bed, buried deep beneath the pile of blankets. Even with the lamp on, Tim couldn't tell how she was doing, or if she was even breathing. He hoped so. Jason sat in a chair pulled up next to the bed, arms crossed, legs kicked out and crossed at the ankles, chin slumped down to his chest.

Tim wondered if he had learned to sleep like that from Bruce or if it was just something tall people found comfortable.

"Jason," he hissed as loud as he dared.

Jason's head snapped up, hand reaching for a gun that wasn't at his waistband before his eyes focused on Tim. Then he looked to Cass, uncrossing his arms and leaning forward to peer down at her. Whatever he saw seemed to be okay, because he leaned back again and glared at Tim.

How is she? Tim mouthed.

What? Jason mouthed back.

Tim huffed and waved for him to come over, keeping his toes scrupulously tucked behind the line of the threshold. He wasn't sure if the last of Jason's temper had burned away yet, or if the threat had nothing to do with Jason's fuse at all, but rather the inexplicable connection he seemed to have with Cassandra. Either way, he wasn't going to risk it.

Rolling his eyes, Jason rose from the chair and crossed on silent feet to meet Tim out in the living room.

"How is she?" Tim asked, voice still pitched low.

Jason shrugged. "Not dead." He rubbed the back of his neck as he looked toward the doorway. "Vitals seem okay, considering. I'm no doctor, though."

"D'you think there'll be long-term side effects?" Tim asked.

"What did I just say?" Jason snapped, then sighed. "We get her through the night, then hand her over to Leslie in the morning."

Tim wasn't sure how they were even going to accomplish that, with what were sure to be snow drifts deeper than anything they were used to and no car. Tim had come over on foot and Jason, as far as he knew, only had a motorcycle. But he supposed that was a tomorrow problem. Or a gnaw-on-it-until-he-cracked-it problem, more likely.

Speaking of which.

"You can get some rest," Tim said, hooking a thumb back toward the couch. "My turn."

Jason looked down his nose at Tim. It usually didn't bother Tim, the fact that he was shorter than most people and Jason in particular, except when the difference felt more symbolic than physical.

He wanted to snap at Jason, to demand to know what he had done to earn such distrust after *months* of truce turned tentative… something. Allyship? Friendship? Tim was Red *Robin*. He had patched Jason up even after everything. He had come here, deliberately trapping himself in a blizzard, because he had thought Jason might need some company. Who did Jason think he was? And who was *Cassandra* to

Jason?

But he didn't. Because, at the end of everything, Tim was a coward.

Tim turned his face away, then his entire back to Jason. "Go. I'll wake you if she gets worse."

He stepped over the threshold and, when no blade or bullet or fisted hand on his collar stopped him, continued to the bed and sat, arms crossed, until the doorway was empty.

A floorboard creaked in the apartment above. Wind bayed outside the window. Cassandra breathed, the barest lift of the blanket layers on her chest the only indication they hadn't failed, at least not yet.

"I think it's bullshit that apparently I know more about what's going on in that girl's head than you do."

It was. It was bullshit.

"First time you came here, you remember what you told me?"

Tim had crawled through Jason's window on a night like this, in a crashing, bloodsoaked thunderstorm. Tim had been shot, twice, and had known Hood's safehouse was close. Had hoped but not *known* that it was empty. Hadn't cared whether it had been or not, even though he assumed Red Hood would happily use his head to kick off a new duffel bag collection. But they had thought Bruce was dead, Damian had taken Robin, Dick and Tim weren't speaking… Tim's options had been Red Hood's emergency supplies or bleeding out in the rain.

Jason had said Cassandra had come only once before, but he had implied it was for much the same reason as Tim. Nowhere else to go.

Tim rubbed his arm, uncomfortable and unsure what to do with his discomfort. His gaze shifted to Cassandra's sleeping profile. It was a rare opportunity to study her without being studied back. Tim had reviewed footage, of course, but even that was scarce. Cassandra had a way of avoiding cameras, likely trained into her from the start. But studying a recording was safer than in person. She had a way of sussing out exactly what Tim didn't want anyone to see. He had to admit, reluctantly, if only to himself, that Cassandra didn't use that knowledge against him for the most part. But he still didn't like it. She made him feel transparent, like a specimen under glass.

He knew the foods Alfred bought specifically for her, how she liked

Bruce to play with her hair, and which weapons she reached for first. He knew because he had watched and studied and annotated. Because she had known everything just by looking at him, and if there was one thing Tim could not afford, it was a disadvantage.

Up close, there wasn't much different to see, just a better sense of detail. In the stark relief of the lamplight, Tim wondered for the first time if Cassandra's nose had been broken in the past. Where the nearly invisible puckered white line beneath her left eye had come from. When she had gotten the empty piercings in her ear.

All questions with no answers. The minutes crept by, and Tim waited.

Several hours later, Cassandra stirred. Tim uncrossed his arms and sat a little straighter, looking from her to the door and back again. Before he could decide whether Jason's should be the first face she saw, Cassandra opened her eyes. Unfocused pupils roved the room until they landed on Tim, then dilated slightly.

"It wasn't until she saw your stupid face that she got scared."

"Hey," Tim whispered quickly, and tried to mold his face into something unthreatening and kindly. He was pretty sure he landed closer to a grimace instead. "Uh, hey. Cass—Cassandra."

He had his hands raised, palms open and visibly empty. He wished he could remember how to sign the things he wanted to say.

"You're at Jason's," Tim said, trying to speak slowly and clearly. "You're safe. You—" he fluttered fingers in the direction of his side, but kept his hands fully raised. "You were hurt. Do you remember?"

Cassandra's lips thinned, pressing white as she started to sit up.

"No, wait," Tim urged, leaning forward with the intent of easing her shoulders back into the mattress.

Cassandra flinched like he had come at her with a knife, which made Tim recoil in mirrored horror.

"Sorry," Tim whispered, then quickly pushed back with his chair, putting another yard between them for good measure. "Sorry, I—"

He had never seen Cassandra flinch before, not like that. Not from him.

“Don’t want to hurt you.”

Cassandra’s teeth were clenched and the words slipped between them so quietly that Tim blinked, unsure if somehow he was beginning to think with Cassandra’s voice.

“I… know?” Tim said. “I don’t want to hurt you either.” He looked down at his own hands, thumb pressing into the palm of the other as if he could smooth out the tension between him and her like a knot in muscle.

“Jason says you’re scared of me.” It was easier to deflect to Jason than to point out her own reaction a moment before.

Cass, jaw still clenched, squinted at him.

Why? What have I ever done to you?

He couldn’t say that any more than he could challenge Jason.

“Come here often?” Tim joked instead into the silence, then regretted it. Would Cassandra Cain even understand a joke like that?

Cassandra looked away. She was still curled protectively in the bed, one arm wrapped across her bandaged middle. Tim looked away as well, weighing whether he could rise to fetch Jason without spooking her again.

“Do you?”

It took the murmured question a moment to register. Tim looked back again, surprised. “Oh. I. Uh.”

He had never really thought about how much the others did or didn’t know. Bruce knew some, as did Alfred, but Tim had been cut off from the rest of the family when he had first fallen through Jason’s window, and he had never really gotten around to updating them.

No, that wasn’t true. He could have gotten around to it. But he didn’t think it was any of their *business*, and he had assumed Jason would feel the same way, just reinforced with bullets. Except Cassandra had come through the same window and was recuperating on Jason’s mattress.

He had been silent for too long, he realized, and scrambled to speak before he made things worse. “Not, uh, often. Just sometimes.” Tim

chewed on his upper lip, remembering again what Jason had told him about Cassandra's one and only other visit. "Before, when Bruce… When he was gone. I didn't know where else to go."

He risked a glance up, only for Cassandra to look away as soon as their gazes connected. Tim's stomach, already queasy with unease, tightened. What did that mean? Was she disgusted by him? Did she pity him? Was she dismissing him? The thought stung, but only for a moment. This was hardly Tim's first encounter with having those emotions directed at him. Experience had taught him to ignore them, to tell himself it didn't matter, and eventually it wouldn't.

Tim decided to push on, as if this were any other conversation, like the early days in the Cave with Bruce when Batman was a disconnected lump and Tim didn't know what to do *but* talk.

"Like, if I'm in the neighborhood and need a place to crash or restock, I'll drop by. Or if I'm bored. I don't know if he particularly likes me here, but he hasn't made me stop. I guess I don't mind pushing my luck." Tim tried to chuckle, but the sound was forced and died quickly. Because he was, or felt like he was, still pushing his luck here. Sure, he and Jason had the little geranium code, but Tim knew he wasn't exactly *welcome*. Jason wasn't calling him up and inviting him over for movie night or anything. And he knew one day he might push too far, stay a little too long, and that would be the end of it.

He didn't like this topic.

"Why were you out in the blizzard?" Tim asked instead. "What happened?"

"Patrol," Cassandra rasped.

"I thought Dick…?" With Bruce away, Dick had been in charge and had called off patrol. Unless he had lied, called it off only for Tim?

Cassandra gave a short shake of her head. "Only me. Important."

Tim tipped his head, considering what he knew about their collective open files. "A case?" Didn't explain why she'd been out on her own, but maybe if something had come up last minute?

Another shake of the head. "Gotham. Important."

Tim had practice translating Bruce's abbreviated grunts, but it still took him a minute to understand. "Patrol isn't *that* important."

Cassandra scowled so deeply that Tim flinched back from her disapproval and scrambled to explain. “There’s a *blizzard*. Dick called patrol off because even the Rogues don’t like starting something in weather like this. Except Victor, maybe, but he’s not in town. Dick checked.”

“Important,” she insisted.

“Important enough to get stabbed?” Which, he supposed the stabbing proved her point that not *everyone* had gone to ground, but still.

Cassandra gave a careful, one-shouldered shrug.

“Bruce won’t like it,” Tim warned, which only earned him another shrug. And that, inexplicably, made him angry.

“No, not—“ He shrugged back at her in exaggeration. “You almost died. Like really, literally. What if you hadn’t been able to make it here? Or if Jason hadn’t been here? Or he couldn’t stop the bleeding and get you warm? Geez, you could *still* die for all we know. You could be bleeding internally or get an infection or go into organ failure or any number of things and we won’t be able to stop it because we can’t get you to Leslie.”

He wasn’t even sure how much of that she caught, but she had shrunk back, not scared but surly. Which only made him madder.

“For ffffff—” Tim remembered where he was just in time and spared a glance out the bedroom door toward the dark living room before reconsidering his words.

“For goodness’ sake, Cassandra,” he hissed instead. “We just got Bruce back.”

Cassandra made a sign at him, fast and curt, arms still tucked in protectively. He couldn’t decipher it quickly enough.

“I don’t—”

“Im*portant*,” she snapped, sounds and signs moving flung at him together. “Doing important. Gotham important. Important to me.”

“What, and it’s not to me?” Tim shot back. “Is that it? Because I’m not an idiot with a death wish who decided to go out alone in a snowstorm?”

Cassandra huffed, a pensive scrunching of her nose that Tim had seen her do only once or twice before when frustrated. She was hurt, he reminded himself. Badly hurt, and he should be gentler. But the accusation still stung. Of course Gotham was important to him. It was his home. He had given so much to this city. Too much, maybe.

“Listen. You…” Tim sucked in a steadying breath, voice dropping down again. “You weren’t here the first time, when Jason… Bruce talks about Gotham, about the mission, but you know he’d fall apart if anything happened to you.”

To any of them, Tim hoped, but especially Cassandra.

Cassandra made the sign again, the one she said meant *important*, but it was more pleading than snappish.

“Not more than you,” Tim countered, but without heat. “Not to Bruce. And…” Bleck. He hated this kind of stuff. “Not to the rest of us either.”

And okay, maybe the skeptical look Cassandra was throwing out wasn’t unwarranted, but it still chafed.

Tim leaned forward, arms braced on his knees and palms pressed flat together.

“Listen, okay? We’re… I know we’re not, like, close. I…” Oh this sucked. He didn’t want to talk about this, didn’t want to have this conversation. Emotional vulnerability was overrated anyways, right?

Tim cast a longing glance at the doorway again, hoping he would spontaneously develop telepathic powers and summon Jason for his turn. But the doorway stayed dark and empty.

Ugh. Fine.

“I know I dropped the ball, okay?” Tim admitted, and for the most part was able to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “Bruce died and I spiraled. I was *right*—“ something he would never stop pointing out, probably “—but I didn’t even notice when you left. And then when I did, I didn’t go after you. It didn’t have anything to do with you, though.”

He didn’t expect it to do any good, but Tim wasn’t a complete idiot. He read books, watched sitcoms, had ingested dramatic dialogues aplenty. He knew what he would want someone to say to him, if he

were in Cassandra's position. Well, there was more he would want to hear, but he wouldn't lie. Cassandra would see it, and that would defeat the point. Whether it did any good or not, he needed to say it and Cassandra needed to hear it, because he'd messed up and she didn't deserve to bleed out in an alley and Bruce *especially* didn't deserve to lose another kid just because Tim was a moron.

"Dick," Cassandra began, then stopped abruptly when her voice came out as a wheezy rasp. She coughed in the back of her throat, lips pressed tightly but cheeks turning pink.

"Oh, sorry, I—" Tim caught himself before he moved too close, then shrank back in his chair and gestured toward the cup on the end table instead. "Can I?"

At her nod, he snagged the cup and sat on the very edge of the bed to swivel the straw around to her lips. He held it there until she waved him off, then replaced the cup on the end table. He didn't get up, though, and she didn't make him.

"Dick tried," Cassandra confessed quietly. "To…" She waved, as if gesturing someone forward. "I said no."

Tim's eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "And he let you?" Dick was a burr of a human being. He didn't badger so much as hover like a persistent, fuzzy bumblebee, buzzing low and unthreateningly in your ear until you gave in.

Cassandra shook her head. "Told him leave or I kill him."

The bottom of Tim's stomach dropped out. It wasn't so much that he thought she would, more that she could. She was the most trained out of all of them and would put up a hell of a fight, more than even Dick could comfortably fend off. They all knew it, and she knew that they knew, which meant even a threat would be taken seriously. That she had even made the threat at all was…

"Couldn't get away from us fast enough, huh?" Tim joked weakly. She'd skipped out during Bruce's *funeral*. Tim had been too lost in his own head to feel it at the time, and then later he had been so sure Bruce was actually alive that the service had meant nothing. It was only now, so long after, that the timing hit him harder.

"Scared," Cassandra admitted quietly. She didn't look scared. She looked like she always did, except the way she kept her face turned away and watched him from the corner of her eye.

“Of us?” Jason had said, but Tim still had a hard time believing it.

“You do not trust me. So I do not trust you.”

Tim frowned. “But…” What did that have to do with anything? Like yeah, trust was good. It helped, for sure. He didn’t trust Damian currently, and that was a problem. He was working on learning to trust Dick again. But that was personal stuff.

He didn’t have the right words. “We were still your team, though.”

“Team,” Cassandra agreed. “Not family.”

Tim blinked. He didn’t see much of a difference. And maybe that had been the root of a lot of problems for him, but it worked, didn’t it? If they had kept all their messiness out of the field, then maybe they would have held together until Bruce came back. His issue was he hadn’t trusted the others to watch his back as his team *or* as his family, and that’s where they had fallen apart.

“But we *are* family, though,” he pointed out hesitantly. “I mean, we were before, at least to me. It was pretty clear what Bruce had planned, you know? But you’re official now. Same last name and everything.”

Sort of. He was Drake-Wayne and she was just Wayne, but close enough. Same last half name, same house half the time, they both loved Bruce, they both fought for Gotham. What else did she need?

Cassandra sighed, little more than a breath, already slipping back into sleep. “No.”

Tim jerked back. “What?”

But she was gone, pulled back under by exhaustion and blood loss, leaving Tim empty-handed. He sat a little while longer on the edge of the bed, staring at her as if she might at any moment open her eyes and explain what she had meant. When she did not, he returned to the chair and waited.

It was a gamble who would wake first, whether he would be able to learn what he needed to know before Jason ran him off, to the other room or out entirely. It was a gamble, but Tim played long odds. He would have his answers here, now, or later. They were a team, after all. If she lived, Cassandra couldn’t avoid him forever.

Jason was still asleep when Cassandra woke next. Tim sat by her bedside, the chair pulled closer but still out of arm's reach. He didn't want to crowd her, just… to be ready. When she woke, eyelashes fluttering, pupils roving hazily until they settled on his face, Tim was there, arms crossed.

He wasn't a douche about it. He waited until Cassandra nodded her consent again, waited until she drank the water from the glass he held to her lips, waited until she had settled back against the pillow again, still short of breath from the mild exertion, but also, he noticed, not curled tight into the mattress like a cat ready to strike.

Only then did he say, "No what?"

She blinked, just once. A Bruce mannerism. It pricked at him, the spine of a burr caught in the tender flesh beneath his fingernail.

"No what?" Tim pressed again. "I said we were family to me, you said no. You can't just say no."

It was how he felt. She didn't have any say over that.

He didn't know how to read Cassandra's face most of the time. Definitely not the way she seemed to know everyone else's, sure, but that was to be expected. No, even in a normal way, Cassandra was opaque to Tim. Not now, though. She was looking at him like he was Damian, like he was a little boy being obstinate and silly, and the familiar, sickly wave of irritation, frustration, and resignation washed over him.

Cassandra caught it, because of course she did. Her head tipped sideways so she could study him through one eye like a curious corvid.

"You do not like me," she said.

"I," Tim began, and stopped. There were too many things he could say. He couldn't be sure which would blow up in his face. "Does it matter to you?" he asked at last. "Whether I like you?"

"Family should," Cassandra retorted.

That made Tim laugh, an honest-to-goodness chuckle, though it caught back in the rough part of his throat and died as a snort. "Not this family." Tim didn't like half of them at least half of the time, and he would bet that *most* of them didn't like him most of the time.

“Do not trust,” Cassandra repeated, voice hoarse and low. “Do not like. Do not love.” She made a motion with her hands, like breaking apart, like scattering. *I am not tied to you. You are not tied to me.*

“I trust you to have my back,” Tim countered, and it was mostly true. They all had each other’s back in the field. In life, Tim was more used to watching his own back, now especially, so not trusting her for that wasn’t a mark against Cassandra.

But Cassandra was shaking her head again, and Tim realized he might have misunderstood. “You… don’t trust me to watch yours,” he said slowly.

Scared, Jason had said.

That stung. It stung a lot, pricking Tim where he was most tender. After all he had done, all he had sacrificed, all the work he had put in, never faltering, never flagging, and he was still the weak link. It made him angry enough to consider standing up and leaving, but Jason was still asleep. He would just be abandoning her, unmonitored, unprotected, and alone, proving her point.

Only children whined about fairness, and Tim hadn’t been a child for a long, long time. Maybe ever. But oh how this family made him want to weep and rage at times. This strange, broken little family with its pieces stuck together with the tacky tar of Gotham and their own scabbed-over wounds. All he had ever wanted was to cling to its edges. But he found he was so, so tired of holding on.

“What have I ever done to you?” Tim wanted to know. “I haven’t done anything.” Damian had tried to *kill* him and still he knew, in the field, that Tim would watch his back. They were working on the rest.

“You look…” Cassandra gestured from Tim to herself. “Like I hurt you.”

Tim touched a hand to the purpling bruise on his jaw, but she shook her head slightly. She pressed fingertips to her chest, not to the metaphorical location of the heart but to the center where her ribs joined, where the ache burrowed the deepest.

“When you look at me.” Her throat worked. Her eyes flicked around Jason’s room, the apartment. “Here.”

That was silly. Tim opened his mouth to protest.

“With Baba.”

Tim closed his mouth. Baba was what she called Bruce, her word for *Dad*. A name she used easily, freely, without hesitation or restraint. Tim knew about David Cain. He understood why, with whatever trauma Cassandra still carried with her, she wouldn’t hesitate to leave that part of her past behind. Why she had had no guilt or conflict about who Bruce was in her life.

That didn’t mean he didn’t envy her. And not just for the name. Envy curled heavy and tight in his stomach every time he found her and Bruce sitting quietly together on the couch, his fingers playing with her hair as he read and she dozed. Every time she pulled Bruce away from his work to spar. Every time she crashed into him or Alfred, throwing her entire body into a hug that was returned without hesitation or launching herself onto Bruce’s back and demanding to be carried, just because she could. Every time she made Bruce laugh. Tim had watched them have entire conversations without saying a single word. She was *easy* with Bruce, and he with her, in a way Tim didn’t know how to be.

It wasn’t even that she was the only girl. It was just that she was Cassandra. Or maybe it was just Tim. Maybe he was the problem. All he knew was that all of the rules and unspoken boundaries he had been so careful to never cross never seemed to apply to her. She was faster, stronger, smarter, scarier, and even if she were none of those things, Bruce’s face would still light up every time he looked at her.

She could see that in him, all the hurt and resentment and longing. He couldn’t hide it, then or now. He could feel the way she was cataloging the way his shoulders slumped and his chin dropped, the flush in his cheeks and the way he swallowed tight and painful. And it had made her run.

Tim dropped his gaze to his hands. What could he say? *I have so little, please. Bruce’s attention, this tentative peace with Jason, it’s all I have*? He couldn’t say that, not to her. Not to the girl who had arrived without a home, without words, without even a name. How he felt, what she saw, it wasn’t her fault. But it also wasn’t something he knew how to fix.

“Why did you come here?” Tim asked, teetering away from the edge of his thoughts and lunging toward a problem he could solve. “I mean, why not call the Cave, have someone pick you up?” Maybe not Dick, if she felt weird about the whole death threat thing still, but Alfred

would have come.

For the first time, Cassandra looked uncomfortable. Her expression pinched and she turned her face away.

“Do you think one of us will… do something? Or try?” Tim picked his way across the words carefully, not sure when they would collapse beneath him. It felt strange to lump himself into an *us* with Dick and Damian. He didn’t think he liked it, but he also didn’t think Cassandra cared about his feelings on the matter.

Cassandra didn’t answer. She didn’t shrink, exactly, but her chin tucked in slightly and her gaze stayed fixed on the comforter tucked around her legs. It reminded Tim of a dog, not cowed so much as uneasy and unwilling to make eye contact that might kick off a fight. She hadn’t had any trouble staring at him before.

“Do you…” Tim hesitated, then abandoned the question for another route. “No one would hurt you. Not even Damian, I don’t think. Well, maybe Damian would try, but only on principle, and Dick wouldn’t let him.” There had been very clear anti-violence parameters laid out as Dick and Bruce tried to slowly reintegrate the Manor.

She still didn’t answer. Tim chewed on his bottom lip, thinking. He could guess, based on her background, why she might avoid any sign of vulnerability. Before tonight, he hadn’t seen Cassandra so much as catch a sniffle, and he was beginning to suspect that was more by design than good fortune. But it wasn’t tenable.

He didn’t understand. But maybe that didn’t matter, Tim decided suddenly, not as a first priority, anyways. He *would* need to understand eventually, because he always needed to understand, to do better, to adapt, but that could wait. It wasn’t what he really needed to know.

Tim sat up straight, squaring his shoulders. Cassandra tensed at the movement so slightly that he might not have caught it under other circumstances. “What do you need me to do?” he asked. “For you to trust me enough to help?”

He tried to think *open*, he tried to think *helpful*, he tried to think *trustworthy* and *safe*. Maybe he wasn’t those things, but he wanted to be them, and maybe if he wanted it badly enough, Cassandra would be able to see at least the desire. They couldn’t go on like this.

She shook her head slightly, not denying so much as showing she was

just as lost as he was.

Tim slumped back again. “Okay,” he murmured. “Okay.”

Maybe it wasn’t fair to expect a magical solution. There had been none with Bruce, after all, or with Jason. He had yet to figure out Damian. So it would take longer to fix this, whatever was broken between him and Cassandra.

Cassandra made a motion, abrupt and fluttery. It took him a moment to realize it had been a sign, not just movement.

“What?”

“Thank you.” The words were scratched to pieces by her raspy throat, but he managed to make them out. “For… finding Baba.”

Oh.

Tim took in a breath, held it, let it out again. He didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t found Bruce for anyone except Bruce and himself, but… But the entirety of last year had been hard. And it was nice to hear the words.

Cassandra was watching him, dark eyes glimmer-bright beneath heavy lids. She dipped her chin, just a little, because he hadn’t needed to say anything at all. She knew, just by watching him.

They sat like that for a long time, watching each other in a silence that for once didn’t feel full or fraught or gnawing. It was a restful silence, heavy and muffled like a snow drift piled high against the side of a house. Tim watched as Cassandra battled drowsiness, lost, then startled awake not long after, fleeing whatever dreams had stalked her sleep.

This time, Tim helped her drink, then crouched down next to the bed so he was eye level with her, so she could see his face clearly. Every line. Every twitch.

“You’re safe here,” Tim promised. “And not just because of Jason. You’re safe here because I’m going to sit right over there and make sure, alright? Safe. Sleep.”

Cassandra didn’t nod. There was no revelatory exchange where they pledged eternal friendship and undying fraternal feelings. He wasn’t even sure how much she caught with her drooping eyes and flagging

consciousness. But Tim held still and let her gaze search his face until her eyelashes settled against her cheeks once more. Then he carefully adjusted the heated blanket over her and returned to his seat to watch and to wait.

Morning came slowly. Jason woke again and kicked Tim out of his seat. Tim tried to doze on the couch but found it impossible to sleep again. He surrendered the battle and got up from the couch to cross to the window that was his usual entrance.

The world outside the window was white—white dunes of snow caught in the corners, white sky, white rooftops as far as he could see. They would need to figure out a way to navigate the snowdrifts and salted roads to get Cassandra to qualified medical help. Calling the Manor was the way to go—they had garages full of vehicles to choose from—but he doubted Jason would allow that. Plan B had yet to present itself.

Tim had thought ahead and packed a fresh bag of coffee along with his bag of games, so he left the window to make himself a cup, then another. He carried both to the doorway of the bedroom, careful not to cross the threshold now that Jason was awake. He wasn't sure if they had regained their equilibrium yet.

This time, when the doorway framed Tim's silhouette, Jason lifted his head without the hissed prodding. He stretched, arching his back and twisting his neck until Tim heard the muffled pop of joints and vertebrae, then shook the drowsiness off like a cat flicking water from its coat. Standing, he met Tim in the doorway and took the offered mug.

He looked weary, not angry, or at least not angrier than usual. Tim sipped slowly from his own mug. His hours awake still hadn't given him the right thing to say. He wasn't sorry. Sedating Cassandra in the bathtub had been the right call in the moment. But he didn't want to lose even the tenuous welcome he had here.

"We talked last night," Tim murmured at last with a small gesture of his mug toward the bed. Jason stayed silent, his mouth twisted in one corner with the exact angle of *None of my business, I don't care.* "We're working it out. I think. I'm… trying, anyways."

He should offer to go. To leave as soon as they figured out how to get Cassandra to some help, maybe even before. But he didn't want to.

Jason grunted. He took another sip, then asked quietly, "How's the

jaw?"

Tim flexed the muscle, wiggling his jaw from side to side until the joint popped. "Sore. I'll live." The question warmed him more than the coffee.

Jason let out a long, slow breath. "What do you think? Cab in civvies to the clinic?"

"She probably shouldn't walk, right?" Tim mused. "And carrying her would probably cause some questions." Calling Dick was right out. And maybe even Alfred, he wasn't sure.

"I could get my hands on a car." Jason was chewing on the inside of his lip thoughtfully. It was less uncertain and more aggressive when he did it. "If we can get her downstairs and into the car, maybe someone could meet us—"

Movement from the bed caught their attention, Cass's hand fluttering in the air. Jason strode to the bedside. Tim stayed where he was.

"What'd she say?" Tim asked quietly, knowing it was some kind of sign but unable to make out what.

"You live with her and you don't know?" Jason snapped, his bristles raised as if they had never lowered.

"I'm not fast, okay?" Tim retorted, shoulders hunching with embarrassment. He was learning. He just wasn't good at it, and it was easier to let Bruce do the translating when body language didn't cut it.

Cassandra made the sign again, then breathed from the bed, "Stop. Talking. About me."

Jason stood over her, arms crossed, his face half-lit from the weak snow glow outside the window. "You got blood all over my floor."

Another flutter, this time the universal sign for brushing away a complaint.

Tim bit back a smile. Cassandra's dismissiveness wasn't as irritating when it was aimed at someone else. He held up his mug to catch her attention, then inclined it slightly, another universal sign, this time for *Want some?*

"Don't," Jason cut in. "He makes coffee like he's trying to reanimate

the dead."

"Wonder why that is," Tim muttered into his own mug. Jason cut him a sharp look, but Cassandra's sleepy eyes glittered.

There was no way to leave until the roads were clear, so once Cassandra's wounds were checked again, breakfast became the next order of business. Cassandra protested over being left in the bedroom, so Jason carried her, gingerly as a cracked vase, to the living room where she could watch them from the beat-to-comfort old recliner that had appeared in the space a couple weeks back.

Jason, it turned out, had magical powers, banging about in the fridge and throwing open cupboards to pull ingredients from various shelves and corners to pour into a cheap white blender or toss into a green-handled frying pan until the scent of a meal began to float in the air. The kitchen was too small for two, so Tim hovered in the narrow strip between kitchen and couch, caught in the gap between wanting to help and knowing how. The first blast of the blender startled him and Cassandra both, but Cassandra pressed her lips together until her mouth went bone white and pointedly did not grab her bandaged side.

"Jason!" Tim snapped, sharp enough that Jason's head jerked up.

Tim had already turned away, panicking internally for no more than a breath before snatching two throw pillows from the couch and holding them out to Cassandra. She stared at him, so he pantomimed holding them to his own head, muffling his ears.

She nodded. Jason was still staring at him, so Tim turned back and flapped the pillows at him. "Some kind of warning, yeah?" Jason stared a moment longer—just to make a point, Tim felt—but then gave a nod.

And that was how they proceeded, Jason calling "Ears!" and Tim pressing pillows to Cassandra's head until the cacophonous bursts of the blender subsided. A thermos of something cold and red-brown-purple was tucked into Cassandra's lap with a long straw, while Tim and Jason sank down onto the couch with plates of scrambled eggs and toast.

"Drink it," Jason ordered when Cassandra wrinkled her nose at the shake. "You need electrolytes." Tim leaned over his own plate to try to get a closer look, curious. Jason jabbed his fork in Tim's direction, making him sit back again. "You, eat your eggs. I want you both out of here once the streets are clear."

The far-off scrape of shovels and snowplows had only recently started up, and the clean blanket of snow would muddy into the slush and grime of Gotham filth, just iced instead of the usual lukewarm dreck. Cassandra sipped at the mixture as if sucking down gruel, stoically but with determination.

“Do you have a plan?” Tim asked around a mouthful of perfectly seasoned eggs.

“I’ll borrow a car. We can take her to the clinic, and Alf can pick her up from there.” Jason gave a *the end* gesture with his food, but Cassandra scowled. “What? What? You can’t stay here.”

Jason swiveled her straw to a better angle, then stabbed at his eggs like they had double-crossed him as he argued, “You need actual medical attention, from an actual medical doctor like Leslie.”

Tim nodded. “Gotta check those organs.”

“Or you might end up a spleenless loser,” Jason finished acerbically. Cassandra’s crooked grin was almost hidden by her cup, but not quite.

It felt like the tension of the night before had never been, covered like trash bags blanketed white and charming by the fresh snow, nothing left to linger but the usual awkwardness Tim carried with him. That peace lasted until breakfast was done. Jason had gone to fetch some mystery car while Tim did the dishes. Tim, stupidly, hadn’t expected a battle of wills, but when Jason moved to stand over Cassandra, he watched as she sank into the cushions of the recliner, spreading down into the cracks in a way that made her seem heavy in a way that was physically impossible. She looked relaxed, but in the way a cat on its back looked relaxed before it drew blood, and the set of her jaw as she watched Jason was anything but agreeable.

“Cass,” was all Jason said. Cassandra said nothing. Tim hovered to the side, picking at the callus on his thumb. He was pretty sure he would need to side with Jason, if it came to blows—for Cassandra’s sake as well as Jason’s—but he didn’t want to betray her trust so quickly.

“We have to go,” Jason tried again. “The car’s downstairs and if it sits too long it’ll get jacked.”

Cassandra made a gesture that Tim loosely translated as *sounds like a you problem.* It would have been funny, but the corners of her eyes and mouth were strained, and her chin was tucked low and tight.

“Cass.” The shortened name felt awkward in Tim’s mouth. He had heard the others call her Cass or Cassie, but it had felt overly familiar in a painful way, like trying to sidle up to a group of kids to join a joke he wasn’t invited into. But maybe that had just been him, making things overly difficult and keeping her at arm’s length.

Cassandra—Cass—flicked her gaze his way.

“You trust Jason.” It wasn’t a guess, it was fact, truth bolstered by the entire night and even the interaction playing out right in front of him. He still wasn’t clear *why* or *how* or even *when*, but he knew it was true. “And you know Leslie. You’ve seen her treat Bruce before.”

She didn’t sink even further into the recliner, so Tim pressed his advantage. “Let us take you to the clinic.”

He was becoming more fluent in her own kind of language, or she was showing him more on purpose, he wasn’t sure, but he could see the unease and fear in the tension in her limbs and the press of her lips. Tim wondered if she could see his own anxiety as he echoed her earlier gesture. *Important.*

Jason was watching them with sharp attention, but Tim kept his focus on Cass. “Bruce will be back tonight. If you won’t go back to the Manor until he’s home, you can stay at my apartment.”

He would rather be at Jason’s safehouse, which was more of a proper space than Tim’s sad little apartment had ever been, but in no universe would Jason let Bruce pull up outside to fetch Cass, stab wound be damned. But Tim didn’t know if Cass would trust him enough to come, so he added, “Jason will come, too.”

“Hey!”

Tim ignored the protest. It was the best solution he had. Jason didn’t need to trust him with Cass. Cass didn’t need to trust him without Jason. And Jason wouldn’t be stalking the streets after whoever stabbed Cass. Tim could keep them all in one place until Bruce was back in town and could take over.

“Come on. It works for everyone.” Tim didn’t have Dick’s knack for wheedling, but he gave it his best shot. Cass bit her bottom lip thoughtfully.

“It doesn’t work for me,” Jason protested.

“It does,” Tim said as he snagged his backpack from behind the couch, “because the games are coming back with me. My plan, my games, my place.”

Jason held a menacing finger in front of Tim’s face, jaw working as he chewed through whatever aggravated comeback was working its way up his throat. But all he said was, “You suck.”

They were okay. They were going to be okay. Tim didn’t have to think *relief* or *triumph* or *hope*. He was sure Cass could see it in every line of him as he looked from her to Jason and back again.

“Alright,” he said, and then, “Alright,” again when no one contradicted him. “To the clinic.”

“To the clinic,” Jason echoed dourly as he bent and hefted Cassandra up for the careful trek downstairs.

They were okay. They were going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

> I don't know if she originated it or just was how I learned about it, but Audrey's Cass calls Bruce "Baba" so that is 100% taken from her fics, because it's perfect and lovely and right.

End Notes

As a quick refresher: I don't read canon. In my little universe, Tim and Cass respect each other but didn't have time to form a tight bond before Bruce "died." They're working on it, okay?

The final chapter will come once these three knuckleheads stop fighting me.

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